



Prepared Remarks for Secretary Paige at the National Truancy Prevention Conference

Thank you, Debbie Price for that introduction. And I want to thank your team at our Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools for doing such a great job on so many fronts: school safety, anti-drug programs, crisis planning and more. You know what it means to build strong alliances to get things done.

With the passage of time comes a degree of wisdom and clarity. And one of the things you can see more clearly at my age is the value of education at an early age.

George Washington once wrote to his school-age nephew, ". . . Every hour misspent is lost forever, and ... future years cannot compensate for lost days at this period of your life." I couldn't have put it better.

Unfortunately, many young Americans have not gotten—or, worse, have ignored—this message.

Here in this city named after George Washington, nearly 7 percent of the public school population was truant during the 2001-2002 school year, and the rate in the District of Columbia's high schools was more than double that.

In Los Angeles, one in 10 public school students is not in school; half do not have written excuses.

On a given day, studies show about 2.7 million students don't show up for school in America. And many communities have a hard time identifying and cataloging the problem, let alone solving it.

The costs of truancy—to schools, to students, to society—is severe. Those who skip school are more likely to get involved with gangs, substance abuse and violent crime. Also, they are more likely to drop out of school or become unemployed.

Each "class" of dropouts costs the country more than \$200 billion in lost lifetime earnings and tax revenue. But the cost to these young men and women in lost pride and potential is incalculable.

This is not "playing hooky." This is playing with fire. What can we do to change it?

This first-of-its-kind national conference will help provide some answers. It's called "Partnering to Prevent Truancy: A National Priority." I want to thank all of the committed people who have partnered with us to address the problem.

Truancy is multifaceted, requiring multiple responses: from schools, parents and law enforcement officers as well as juvenile justice and community and health and faith-based organizations. As Assistant Attorney General Deborah Daniels has noted, "The education system can't do it alone." That's why the Department of Justice, the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education have each developed complementary plans to prevent truancy.

We need to work together. It starts with doing our very best to give students the best possible education. Let me tell you what we're doing.

It doesn't get much press, but a major focus of the No Child Left Behind Act is to keep kids in school. How? First, by dragging truancy out of the shadows.

The secrecy and dishonesty surrounding truancy often serve to hide the scope of the problem from those in a position to prevent it. What's worse, the truant student breaks free of the institutions and adult relationships that keep his or her life tethered to a productive path. All of which makes future truant episodes more likely.

We must break this vicious cycle. And we are.

The No Child Left Behind Act requires that localities keep track of truancy in a detailed way—school-by-school, not just by district, county or grade. No exceptions, no excuses.

In addition, the rules state that 95 percent of students in each subgroup—more on that later—must be present when the NCLB accountability tests are given. This provides a real incentive for teachers and principals to crack down on truancy.

For the first time, all 50 states have their own tailored accountability plans in place. Only 11 states were in full compliance with federal education law when I became secretary of education.

Students between grades three and eight are tested in reading and math annually, so educators can measure their progress and help those who need it before it's too late.

Another major requirement of NCLB is that test scores be "disaggregated"—broken down by group. Now we can see exactly which students need the most help, whether they are low-income, English language learners, disabled students or those with special needs.

We must make certain that students of all races and ethnicities are given equal opportunities to succeed. Their test scores must no longer be hidden behind the "norm"—in the shadows.

This new emphasis, this new attitude, is resulting in better performance for both students and schools. In states as diverse as Georgia and Illinois, North Carolina and Maryland, and Wisconsin and New Mexico, test scores are rising and the troubling achievement gap is shrinking.

And students once at greatest risk are making the greatest gains. In our largest urban school districts, we've seen a five-point jump in fourth-grade reading proficiency and a seven-point increase in fourth-grade math proficiency—in just one year.

Nationwide, the percentage of African American and Hispanic fourth-graders who know their reading and math basics rose more between 2000 and 2003 than in the previous eight years combined. This is great news.

Meanwhile, the number of schools meeting their state-set goals, known as Adequate Yearly Progress, or AYP, is also on the upswing. In just one year, Pennsylvania has gone from 62 percent of schools meeting their goals to 81 percent; Maryland from 67 percent to 86 percent; North Carolina from 48 percent to 71 percent; Georgia from 64 percent to 78 percent.

The bottom line: states are paying more attention to their schools and students than ever before.

Allow me to quote Georgia school superintendent Kathy Cox: "After 95 percent test participation and attendance as a second indicator, holy smokes, we have addressed truancy.... [It] wouldn't have happened without AYP."

Georgia has formed a truancy task force, and required communities and schools to submit anti-truancy plans. And the Georgia legislature this year passed a law to take drivers' licenses away from students with more than 10 unexcused absences. Holy smokes indeed.

Across the country, we are seeing many other creative efforts to crack down on the problem.

Washington, D.C., has stepped up enforcement, picking up thousands of truant students and sending detailed attendance plans to principals.

In Tennessee, welfare payments can now be severely reduced for truancy.

A newly signed New Mexico law subjects parents of chronic truants to fines and imprisonment.

And in Texas, students themselves can be sentenced to confinement.

The states have decided these penalties, and they're taking the problem very seriously.

But, truth be told, by the time truants reach the criminal justice system it's often too late. We must redouble our efforts to prevent truancy long before that occurs, one student at a time.

This conference will focus on the positive collaborations between education, juvenile justice and health officials in states across the country. It will also examine their differences.

We want to encourage states to develop clear definitions of truancy and accurate systems to track it.

And we will look at the causes of truancy. Sometimes it can be traced to an undiagnosed learning condition or a failure to properly be taught how to read.

One young learning-disabled man from Florida was profiled on the news last week. He had been passed along from grade to grade before he dropped out of school. He said, "I just went with the flow...[thinking] I must be doing something right, but I don't know what it is." He added, "They just wanted to get me out of school, and that's not right."

No, it isn't. His problems should have been discovered 10 years earlier. That's why I feel so strongly about our emphasis on reading.

We have invested almost \$4.7 billion over four years for our popular, groundbreaking Reading First and Early Reading First programs. They offer teachers training in scientifically proven instructional methods—no fads. We've trained 45,000 teachers so far.

We've also decided to focus on the children in the system and their families by empowering them with choices. Parental involvement is one of the most critical factors in preventing truancy.

No Child Left Behind encourages parental involvement. School "report cards" are regularly sent so parents can monitor their school's performance as well as their child's.

Eligible parents in poorly performing schools can receive free after-school homework help and tutoring for their child. And, for the first time, parents have the ultimate accountability measure: the choice to leave a poorly performing school for a better one.

More than 160,000 children have benefited from choice or tutoring options in the first year of the law, and many more will be added as their parents learn about them.

The options include successful charter schools, such as the KIPP Academies, which require parents to sign a "Commitment to Excellence Form" promising to be involved in their child's education. As the KIPP credo states, "There are no shortcuts. Success is built through desire, discipline and dedication. The path to success is education."

Another risk factor for truancy is school safety. Deborah Daniels noted that the rate of ninth- to 12th-graders who miss school because of safety concerns is up 50 percent since 1993. A study by Johns Hopkins University found that one-quarter of truants feel pressured or bullied. This gives us still another reason to collaborate closely with leaders from the criminal and juvenile justice systems.

Finally, we must tackle head-on the problem of truancy in high schools. As it now stands, nearly a third of ninth-graders will not graduate from high school on time.

We must introduce the reform principles of No Child Left Behind to all high schools.

President Bush's Preparing America's Future High School Initiative would equip states and local education leaders with the latest information to raise awareness of the need for systemic and structural change. It would then support these changes with resources and expertise.

States determine the trajectory toward excellence that they want, and we commit to giving them the tools they need. Last week we held a summit to help states develop and share these bold ideas.

You've heard about the three As: attendance, attachment and achievement. It's the right recipe for reform.

We must give our students a sense of brotherhood and belonging in our schools, so they do not look for it on the street corners. We must get them to clearly see the inescapable link between school and success.

It's up to us to keep them excited, engaged and—most importantly—enrolled. [The "Three Es."]

If our experiences of the past three years are any indication, I am truly encouraged. President Bush and I have always believed that public schools and their students would respond positively if challenged with high expectations. And they're proving us right!

Now I look forward to working with all of you to take the next step and remove the excuses for truancy, one by one, until none are left. Thank you.

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